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AUTHOR Elliott, Norbert; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The commonalities between the teaching of writing and the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) are discussed. With common instructional practices of iterativeness, contextualization, and cognition delineated between the two fields, four levels of literacy for ESL students are specified. Four levels of ability are distinguished, including: basic, intermediate, academic, and disciplinary. It is argued that establishing levels of literacy sets the construct validity of programs and clarifies their development. In addition, it is suggested that teachers of writing can best be used at the academic and disciplinary levels of literacy, where too often the task of writing instruction is left to disciplinary specialists and the focus is on principles of inquiry and rhetoric. The use of writing teachers at only the lowest levels of ESL instruction is seen as too limited a view of their role. (MSE)

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ED323762

Norbert Elliot
Director of the Program in Technical Writing
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Jerry Paris
Director of the Program in English as a Second Language
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Janet Bodner
Instructor in the Program in English as a Second Language
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Title: The Teacher of Writing in the ESL Curriculum

ABSTRACT

This paper begins by establishing commonalties between the teaching of writing and the teaching of English as a second language. With common instructional practices of iterativeness, contextualization, and cognition delineated between the two fields, the paper then specifies four levels of literacy for ESL students: initial basic writing ability, intermediate writing ability, academic writing ability and disciplinary writing ability. Disaggregation of the construct of literacy and a refusal to bureaucratize knowledge, the paper submits, are central to the establishment of effective ESL program development.

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Norbert Elliot
Director of the Program in Technical Writing
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Jerry Paris
Director of the Program in English as a Second Language
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Janet Bodner
Instructor in the Program in English as a Second Language
New Jersey Institute of Technology

The Teacher of Writing in the ESL Curriculum

An estimated 28 million people in the U.S. have non-English language backgrounds; that is, one person in every eight has a history of using English as a second language (Waggoner, 1978). By the early 1990s enrollments of more than 1 million foreign students are predicted in higher education (Scully, 1981). Such data suggest the need for and importance of English as a second language (ESL) instruction in higher education. At the New Jersey Institute of Technology we have found that teachers of writing provide solid instructional support for our ESL program. In this paper we will examine why and how teachers of writing may prove valuable additions to an ESL curriculum.

The Teaching of ESL and the Teaching of Writing

Twentieth century instruction in English as a second language seems to have proceeded in three distinct phases. In its first phase ESL instruction was influenced by the cultural demands for systematization which characterized America from the turn of the century until the first chill of the Cold War. Illustrative of this Melting Pot instruction is Henry Ford's English School where non-English speaking employees were taught the virtues of uniformity along with the tenses of English. A description of the school's commencement is emblematic: descending the gang plank of an immigrant ship on stage,

members of the class dressed in their native garb poured into the Ford melting pot stirred by instructors. As the pot began to boil, the students walked out of the pot in American clothes waving American flags (Zunz, 1982).

In the second phase ESL instruction was characterized by the call for scientific rigor which emerged in the wake of the Soviet launch of Sputnik 1957. American scientific and technological superiority were, for the first time, questioned. Methodology quickly became the watchword. In response to this environment, Robert Lado published Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach in 1964. In its desire to be scientific and objective, Lado advanced "hypothetical laws of language learning" which led to the drill and accuracy sequences which still influence so much ESL instruction.

A third phase, however, began to acknowledge the importance of context to instruction. In 1964 Dell Hymes published Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology. With essays by Franz Boas, Claude Levi-Strauss, Kenneth L. Pike, Eugene A. Nida, and John Gumperez, the textbook advocated "the study of language within the context of anthropology" (xxiii). Such an orientation was in clear opposition to the cultural homogeneity of the melting pot and the physics envy of the scientific approach. Stressing the importance of context, Hymes raised the issue of communicative competence.

It is in the tradition of Hymes that the new paradigm of ESL teaching occurs. Raimes (1983) identifies the present approach as one which sees language use as communicative; emphasizes real language use as opposed to usage; recommends a student-centered classroom; encourages language acquisition; develops humanistic, interpersonal approaches, and considers the nature of the learner, the learning process, and the learning environment.

In similar fashion to the teaching of ESL, the teaching of writing has emerged into a field of its own with an articulated sense of its history (Berlin, 1984, 1987) its theoretical orientations (North, 1987) and its research methodologies (Hillocks, 1986). Although

there is diversity, there are shared assumptions which determine the field. Three elements of the current paradigm may be identified which are especially relevant to the teacher of writing who will work within an ESL curriculum.

First, it is acknowledged that the act of writing is a complex process. While early research implied that writing was linear in nature (Rohman, 1965), later research summarized in Hillocks (1986) reveals that writing is a breathtakingly subtle process in which the writer moves about in an iterative and complex cognitive path encompassing planning and transcribing, reading and rereading, revising, generating new ideas, and editing those ideas.

Second, it is known that the act of writing is influenced by the context in which the writing is performed. Nearly half a century of empirical research has led writing instructors to abandon de-contextualized grammar instruction in favor of methods employing discussion of discourse from the college classroom, the scientific laboratory, and the business community.

Third, it is acknowledged that writing is a form of thinking. Often, writing is seen as a mere technology, a skill which may be taught by the developmental educator and mastered simply and efficiently by the student. Far more significant is that the act of writing has powerful psychodynamic properties (Ong, 1982). Writing must be seen as a way of creating--not merely recording--meaning.

Clearly, these characteristics echo the assumptions of the field of ESL. Both fields acknowledge the complexity of the communicative process, the necessity of acknowledging context, and the rewards of utilizing language. Both fields, therefore, seem to have the necessary commonalty so that a teacher of writing may be an effective teacher of English as a second language.

It is, however, significant that both fields seem to aggregate the constructs of literacy which underlie programs. Just as writing ability is taken to be all of a piece for students whose best language is English, so too is competency in English often viewed as a

single assessment goal for non-native students. In order for the teacher of writing to play an effective role in the ESL curriculum, levels of writing ability must be established.

Levels of Writing for ESL Students

In the modern university, there are at least three levels of student literacy operating simultaneously. At the initial level basic literacy, as the New Jersey Basic Skills Council (1988) states, is concerned with allowing students to achieve those "skills of thought and communication that an individual needs not only to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a college education but also to become a fully participating member of society." At a second level, academic literacy is achieved when students are able to produce the various forms of writing appropriate to a university's general studies curriculum. The ability to take class notes, to summarize and evaluate, to perform general library research, and to argue are among the skills gained in the pursuit of academic literacy. At a third level, disciplinary literacy is concerned with enabling students to achieve competency in their specific disciplines. The chemical engineering major and the business major must have a sense of the forms of discourse most appropriate to their fields of study and know how to communicate effectively by employing that discourse.

ESL instruction, it can be argued, should proceed within this overall context. As such, four levels of writing ability for ESL students may be identified: initial basic writing ability, intermediate basic writing ability, academic writing ability, and disciplinary writing ability.

Initial Basic Writing Ability:

The criteria below may help instructors of ESL students to identify the achievement of basic writing ability, the aim of which is communicative competency in written English:

--Papers written in response to experiential topics should indicate distinct organizational patterns.

--Sentence structure should indicate beginning competency in basic English word order.
--Word choice will be influenced by the development of basic English vocabulary.
--Grammar and mechanics should be employed in ways that do not overwhelmingly distract the reader.

Practically, since the Educational Testing Service specifies similar criteria for an acceptable score on its writing sample, connections between the ETS scoring criteria and the achievement of initial basic literacy are appropriate to emphasize (Hamp-Lyons, 1989).

Intermediate Basic Writing Ability:

A set of criteria for this transitional level of literacy may be described as follows:

--While the aim of basic literacy is communicative competency, the aim of intermediate basic literacy is control of this competency.
--The organizational patterns of such papers reflect an ability to present information from multiple texts.
--The sentence structure is aimed at increased use of varied sentence patterns.
--The word choice suggests a desire to expand English vocabulary by seeking precision of word choice.
--The student at this level begins to control and experiment with grammar and mechanics so that writing is produced which does not distract the reader.

At this level, the writer should be able to present a complex organizational pattern in which ideas are elaborated, in contrast to the impulse for closure present in those writers just achieving basic literacy. In essence, the writer's growing confidence is exhibited in intermediate basic literacy.

Academic Writing Ability:

A set of criteria for this more advanced level may be described as follows:

--The aim of this level of literacy is to foster student expression so that academic communicative competency may be achieved in the university.
--The organization of such papers will exhibit controlled responses to expository and argumentative demands of topics.
--The sentence structure will aim at cohesive logic, balanced development, and fluency.
--The word choice is informed by language use in a university's general studies curriculum.
--The grammar and mechanics suggest an attempt to explore various forms of control associated with fluency.

At this level is evidence that the student is beginning to employ academic discourse. The writing should indicate that the student is able to communicate complex ideas with relative exactness.

We believe that it is at this level and the next that the teacher of writing is most likely to be most effective as a teacher of ESL students. In levels of initial and intermediate basic writing ability, the teacher of writing is not likely to have the necessary linguistic training and technical expertise to help students achieve the first two levels of literacy; however, we have found that teachers of writing may have success in helping students to achieve academic and disciplinary writing ability.

Disciplinary Writing Ability:

These characteristics describe the achievement of literacy within a specialized field of study:

> --The aim of this level of literacy is that students gain communicative competency in the discourse of their field of study.
> --Organizational topics follow the topics and forms central to the major.
> --Sentence structure is aimed at producing documents embodying brevity, efficiency, and ease of comprehension for the reader.
> --Word choice is influenced by language use in the field.
> --Grammar and mechanics are aimed at exploring those forms associated with fluency.

At this level of literacy, the student may, for example, present a proposal to a defined audience. Central to the technical major, applied writing is thus employed to advance disciplinary literacy.

The levels of literacy discussed above are in no way meant to be prescriptive. Levels of competency in writing by non-native students will vary from program to program and institution to institution. In reality, a layered concept of literacy is best viewed as a construct, a way to clarify our understanding of how programs may develop and who will teach in them.

Conclusion: The Need for Program Development

In this paper we have tried to articulate tacit assumptions regarding connections between the teaching of writing and the teaching of English as a second language. In expressing our belief that the issues of literacy and its instruction need to be addressed in all ESL program development, our argument has been twofold.

First, we believe that establishing levels of literacy sets the construct validity of programs and clarifies their development (Elliot, Plata, Zelhart, 1990). Recent scholarly attention has called attention to our culture's need to think more carefully about definitions of literacy (i.e., Garaubard, 1990). Although ESL instruction has been sensitive to various instructional purposes--English for Specific Purposes, for example (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 1989)--there remains a need for an articulated hierarchical and developmental model in which instruction may be structured and assessment may be designed for our heterogeneous national population. As Hymes (1980) has argued, "We need to address the linguistic heterogeneity of our country as a permanent feature of it, discuss what shape it will and should have, and anticipate the future." Our paper serves as a contribution in an effort to disaggregate the construct of literacy.

Second, we believe that teachers of writing can best be used within the ESL curriculum at academic and disciplinary levels of literacy. It is ironic that, at the very levels in which teachers of writing may be the most help to ESL programs, the ESL field seems reticent to proceed. Spack (1988), for example, has argued that the teaching of writing in the discipline should be left to disciplinary specialists and that ESL composition teachers should focus on general principles of inquiry and rhetoric. This paper disagrees with such a limited vision of the role of ESL composition teachers. Spack bases her argument on the incorrect assumption that a writing instructor must master the discourse of another discipline to be a successful teacher in that discipline. Falling victim to the bureaucratization of knowledge that is an effect of the disciplinary focus of higher education, Spacks forgets that undergraduate education does not train specialists for the

academy but rather individuals who must be able to communicate with a wide variety of audiences within organizations. Even the most prescriptive science and engineering curriculum does not seek to create technicians who will only communicate with other specialists. It is necessary to recall that informed ESL instruction, proceeding from a framework of curiosity about all types of discourse, has its roots in the work of Hymes (1964). Operating within the melting pot and pseudo-scientific traditions, Spack would divorce discourse from its true communicative impulse while driving the disciplines apart in the name of specialization. What is needed in unity of instructional purpose, not increasing disciplinary specialization. To the end of common instructional goals, this paper is a contribution.

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